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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HELSINKI 001310

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [SENV](#) [PINR](#) [FI](#)

SUBJECT: FINLAND'S "NATO CANDIDATE" STRESSES TRANS-ATLANTIC TIES AND SHARED VALUES

11. (SBU) Summary: Swedish People's Party candidate and MEP Henrick Lax briefed us on the presidential campaign and the political challenges facing the US and Europe. He expressed grave concern about developments in Russia and argued that Finland must assume far greater leadership in helping formulate a unified EU response. As the only candidate to advocate Finnish NATO membership, Lax emphasized how vital the trans-Atlantic relationship is to European security. He welcomed NATO expansion eastward, both for strategic reasons and as an effective means of spreading democracy. As he has done publicly, Lax argued that Europeans and Americans share the same fundamental values and that current disagreements are political, not value-based. However, he cautioned, Guantanamo and discord over climate change offer easy targets for those who allege that European and US values have diverged. Lax will not win Finland's presidency; nevertheless, he has contributed a balanced, fact-based NATO message and his strongly trans-Atlantic stance has influenced the overall campaign positively. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Swedish People's Party (RKP) presidential candidate and European Parliamentarian (MEP) Henrick Lax took time out of the busy campaign calendar to brief Charge on a range of political issues over lunch at the Residence Dec. 21. Lax was accompanied by RKP MP Astrid Thors; Charge by PolChief and A/PAO.

The EU Needs a Finnish-Led Response to Russia

13. (SBU) Lax expressed grave concern about deeply entrenched problems in Russia and about the lack of a unified EU response. Russia's strong economic progress masks a dismal environmental record; backsliding on democracy; an inability to address border issues and other regional security problems; and serious social ills symbolized by a male life expectancy of only 57 years. In response, he argued, the EU must formulate a single, unified message and Brussels must lead a tough, frank dialogue with Russian President Putin aimed at resolving -- not just discussing -- these challenges. However, Lax continued, the Union has failed to do so, with France favoring one form of dialogue, the Nordics another, and the newest EU member states still another. Lax agreed wholeheartedly with Charge's suggestion that Finland is uniquely placed to play a leadership role in formulating a unified EU response. In fact, he suggested that, unlike new EU members who still bear so much animosity toward Moscow, only Finland (and, perhaps, Germany) among EU member states has the necessary historical experience and the geographic imperative to do so. Unfortunately, Lax concluded, neither President Tarja Halonen nor the GOF under PM Matti Vanhanen has shown any inclination to lead such an EU effort.

NATO as a Vehicle to Spread Shared Values

14. (SBU) Although he lamented the EU's slow, disjointed response to Moscow, Lax was optimistic about NATO's emerging role throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. Of the eight candidates competing in Finland's presidential election, Lax is the only one to urge publicly that Finland join NATO as soon as possible. Now viewed domestically as "the NATO candidate," his campaign statements have focused on traditional arguments, such as the vital nature of a robust US role in European defense and the clear strategic logic of Finland's joining the alliance. But Lax also highlighted the importance of NATO as a hopeful tool for bolstering regional security and for strengthening the emerging democracies along Russia's borders. NATO's expansion eastward could, in turn, have positive impacts on Russia itself, he said. Lax also expressed great interest in our suggestion that while the EU may be currently suffering from "expansion fatigue," NATO may serve as useful role in continuing a productive dialogue with countries that are actively seeking membership in the "European club."

15. (SBU) In terms of pushing democratic and other reforms "eastward," Lax noted that one of his main

domestic campaign messages has been identical to one that the Embassy also frequently delivers: that is, that Europeans and Americans share a deeply-entrenched set of fundamental values regarding democratic governance, market economies, respect for human rights, and commitment to equal opportunity and basic personal freedoms. Current differences over approaches to Iraq, the war on terrorism and even the environment are political, not value-based. Lax said that his pro-NATO and oftentimes pro-US stance in the campaign leaves him open to criticism, particularly at a time when Finnish and European public opinion is deeply at odds with US climate change policy and perceived US mistreatment of terrorism suspects at Guantanamo and elsewhere. Deep differences of opinion on these issues "do not make my job easy," he said wryly, but added that he remains convinced that Europe and the US fundamentally agree that the spread of their shared values is crucial to ensuring regional security in Europe and elsewhere.

Comment

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16. (SBU) As the candidate representing Finland's tiny (but influential) Swedish-speaking minority, Lax has almost no chance of winning the January election. Nonetheless, his campaign has been of interest to us, chiefly because he has made a realistic, fact-based contribution an ongoing NATO membership discussion which, unfortunately, is often fraught with misperceptions and exaggerations. Also, while none of the eight presidential candidates has resorted to the type of simplistic anti-American jingoism that has characterized some European elections over the past few years, we believe that Lax's pro-NATO, pro-business and generally pro-American stance has influenced the public debate positively.

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